

OUR VIEW

CIA on campus

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The latest wave of protests on campuses across the nation focuses on what students claim is the indefensible presence of the Central Intelligence Agency on campus — both in recruiting students to work for the agency and in funding professorial research.

There's more than a tinge of hypocrisy in the charges. In the area of faculty research, those opposed to the CIA funding grants argue that the sensitive nature of the business in which the organization is engaged make scholars appear to have special ties. Special ties? That's what grant money is all about — whomever it comes from.

Recent media reports revealed that professors at a number of universities, including Harvard and Michigan, were receiving funds for research and study from the CIA. Although there is no CIA-sponsored research on the University of Iowa campus, there's very little substantive difference between CIA money and money from the more traditional "special ties." Consider, for example, a recent study done at the University of Iowa that concluded aspartame was safe for human consumption. The study was funded by the Searle & Co., a maker of aspartame which markets the product as NutraSweet. Or another UI study that showed sugar does not contribute to hyperactivity, funded in part by the sugar industry. Or studies on various campuses funded by the tobacco industry showing that smoking is not related to lung cancer.

Some protesters argue further there's a possibility that grants from other governmental sources could be coming indirectly from the CIA. Shocking? Hardly. One need look no further than the UI Physics Department to see that the Defense Department does precisely that same thing protesters are afraid the CIA is doing. Some money for defense-related research, or research of interest to the DOD gets "funneled" through organizations like NASA.

It's splitting hairs to claim it's more ethical for professors to do work on grants indirectly funded by the DOD than on those indirectly funded by the CIA.

Most universities lay out the conditions under which professors can accept funds from any external source. If these guidelines are applied to CIA money with the same hand they are applied to other grant money, then it is the ethics of the professors involved — not the name or nature of the funding organization — that will determine whether they will do the work and whether the funding organization will influence their findings.

On the issue of recruitment, virtually the same arguments apply. CIA recruiting isn't any different from the recruiting done by any big corporation.

Student protesters argue that CIA representatives don't tell candidates that their work sometimes includes espionage, assassinations and the overthrow of governments. That's true. But neither do the representatives of major industries tell students that their companies pollute the air or dump carcinogens into the water. Or that the product they make may cause cancer, or that they exploit foreign labor and don't bother to ensure safe working conditions there.

Still, it's a fair guess that after four years of a liberal arts education, students know all this. It's an insult to them and to the universities that have provided their education to suggest that students are naive bait ready to be eaten up by the CIA.

Perhaps the most salient point in the debate is that no student is forced — or even encouraged — to meet with CIA recruiters.

Overall, caving in to demands that a group be banned from campus because of its ideology or its activities does not serve to reinforce the kind of freedoms a university should foster. Selectively setting limitations on which groups are permitted on campus is no more than the exercise of imposing value judgments — one that ultimately permits some ideological bent to operate at the exclusion of others.

What's happening on the campuses of Iowa State and the University of Iowa is akin to what happened in Illinois when the Nazis marched in Skokie. Few agreed with their motives or even approved of their presence, but everyone had to admit the Nazis had a constitutional right to assemble and march.

Certainly one need not support what the CIA does to affirm the agency's right to interact with students and professors on university campuses. The university presidents were right to permit the recruiting to continue.